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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HILLAH 000012

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TAGS: I2 PGOV

SUBJECT: KARBALA GOVERNOR AQEEL DISCUSSES PROVINCIAL SITUATION

REF: HILLAH 0000010

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Classified by PRT Leader Angus T. Simmons by reason 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Karbala Cable.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: On January 21, 2008, BG Cardon, 3ID DCS, members of his staff, PRT Leader and PRToffs met with the Karbala Provincial Governor and the Provincial Chief of Police (PCOP) for a general discussion regarding events in Karbala Province. A key topic of discussion with the Governor was his recent meeting with representatives of the Office of Muqtada al-Sadr (OMS) to discuss conditions for an open dialogue with OMS. The Governor described the substance of those discussions with the Sadrists. He also mentioned for the first time to the PRT Leader his strong interest in a south central Iraq regional airport project (Central Euphrates Airport Project). End Summary.

¶3. (C) On January 21, 2008, BG Cardon, members of BG Cardon's staff, PRT Leader and PRToffs met at FOB Huseiniyah with Karbala Provincial Chief of Police, BG(P) Ra'ad Shaker and Provincial Governor Aqeel Ghazali. Much of the discussion concerned Karbala's recent success in handling over two million visitors (Septel) over the Ashura period.

¶4. (C) PRT Leader mentioned to Governor Aqeel that the PRT Leader had read a press account of talks between the Governor and OMS that reported resulted in a 19 point agreement between the attendees of that meeting. The Governor stated that he had attended such a meeting but said there had been no written 19 point agreement. He said the purpose of the meeting was to encourage a principle of open doors for dialogue on any matters within the law and the constitution. Governor Aqeel stated that the central government encourages dialogue that promotes cooperation at all levels. He said that he has attended a few meetings with representatives of OMS to both demonstrate willingness towards cooperation and to explore a framework for cooperation. The Governor said the parties discussed as preconditions to further dialogue that: (1.) OMS must accept that the government will move equally against all groups that have unlawful intentions. (2.) There would be no discussions regarding detainees or the removal of persons from lists of persons wanted by the government. (3.) The Governor must receive a written letter of authorization by Muqtada al-Sadr for any persons claiming to negotiate on behalf of OMS before he would sign any agreement with the group. (4.) Sadrists would not carry weapons openly. (5.) OMS must not operate any sharia courts. (6.) OMS would not make any announcements intended to inflame or incite the people. According to Governor Aqeel, the meeting lasted for four hours. He said the OMS representative, Sheik Hamed Alawi, called the Governor stubborn but the OMS reaction appeared positive. The Governor reports that these

matters have now been submitted to all parties for further discussion. The Governor cautioned that there are rogue elements of JAM who will not be controlled by any agreement with OMS. Team Leader noted that it was positive to dialogue with all groups that accepted the Iraqi Constitution and the rule of law and asked in a quiet aside whether it would be helpful for him to meet with the Sadrists as well. Governor Aqeel responded that he did not think they would be willing to meet with USG representatives.

¶ 15. (C) Team Leader then asked about the status of the (Sadrists) Deputy Governor Hasnawi and other PC members who were apparently under Karbala arrest warrants for terrorist activities but were sometimes quoted in the Baghdad press claiming charges against them were politically motivated and running around trying to have their indictments quashed. The Governor said the Karbala warrants were valid in Karbala but had no jurisdiction in Baghdad. He said these individuals are probably hiding out in COR members houses. Governor Aqeel said they could not return to Karbala and the PC would soon vote to replace them.

¶ 16. (C) Governor Aqeel raised for the first time in a meeting with PRToffs Karbala's his interest in the Central Euphrates airport project which would be based in Karbala and serve south-central Iraq. Governor Aqeel is clearly feels concerned that the Najaf project could impact on his hopes for the future Central Euphrates International airport project and called the Najaf Airport an "illegal" airport project. Team Leader acknowledged that PRT is working with the Najaf and GOI authorities to ensure that the project is an ICAO compliant airport. He also noted that he had heard about the Central Euphrates airport project from newspaper articles but had never once been briefed about the project by any Karbala official (and did not even learn for certain where it would be located). Team Leader noted that the Najaf airport could be made operational relatively quickly, but it was his understanding that the green field Central Euphrates Airport project would likely take a number of years to bring on line. However, he welcomed a briefing from provincial authorities about the project.

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¶ 17. Comment: Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Governor's discussions with the Sadrists is that those discussions were apparently initiated with the encouragement of the central government. It would appear the Central Government is pleased to have provincial officials carry out negotiations to reconcile with those Sadrists who are willing to act within the frame of the Iraqi Constitution and the rule of law. The Provincial Governor's demand for written authorization to negotiate, signed by Muqtada al-Sadr, could also indicate that the national government is simply weary of trying to negotiate a deal with a group that speaks with too many voices.
SIMMONS